

Life in the Trenches

Soldiers Letters Home

Directions: Daily life for soldiers during WWI was a grueling experience. Imagine that you are a soldier fighting in the trenches on the Western Front. Write a letter home describing the conditions in the trenches. Two page, or 500 word length minimum.



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The stench of the dead bodies now is awful as they have been exposed to the sun for several days, many have swollen and burst. The trench is full of other occupants, things with lots of legs, also swarms of rats.
— *Sergeant A. Vine*

The trench, when we reached it, was half full of mud and water. We set to work to try and drain it. Our efforts were hampered by the fact that the French, who had first occupied it, had buried their dead in the bottom and sides. Every stroke of the pick encountered a body. The smell was awful. — *Private Pollard*

No washing or shaving here, and the demands of nature answered as quickly as possible in the handiest and deepest shell-hole.
— *Guy Chapman*



18702—Removing the Dead from the Trenches.
Library of Congress

The other one said to me “Chas, I am going home to my wife and kids. I’ll be some use to them as a cripple, but none at all dead! I am starving here, and so are they at home, we may as well starve together.” With that he fired a shot through his boot. When the medics got his boot off, two of his toes and a lot of his foot had gone. But the injuring oneself to get out of it was quite common. — *Charles Young*

The other soldiers in the hut took their shirts off after tea. They were catching lice. We had never seen a louse before, but they were here in droves. The men were killing them between their nails.
— *Henry Gregory*

All we lived on was tea and dog biscuits. If we got meat once a week we were lucky, but imagine trying to eat standing in a trench full of water with the smell of dead bodies nearby.
— *Richard Beasley*

If you have never had trench feet described to you, I will tell you. Your feet swell to two or three times their normal size and go completely dead. You could stick a bayonet into them and not feel a thing. If you are fortunate enough not to lose your feet and the swelling begins to go down, it is then that the intolerable, indescribable agony begins. I have heard men cry and scream with the pain and many had to have their feet and legs amputated. — *Sergeant Harry Roberts*

Trench Foot

The unsanitary conditions in the cold, damp trenches on the battlefields of the Great War were so dire they gave rise to a medical condition, aptly termed “trench foot.” While the condition consisting of painful swollen and blistered feet had been recorded as far back as the Napoleonic Wars when soldiers were exposed to the elements for long durations, it became endemic in the trenches of Western Europe during WWI.



Trench Foot Symptoms

- blisters
- blotchy skin
- redness
- tissue necrosis (skin that dies and falls off)
- coldness
- heaviness
- numbness
- pain when exposed to heat
- persistent itching
- prickliness
- tingling

Symptoms may only affect a portion of the feet or, in severe cases, can extend over the entire foot and toes.

With water and mud rising above the ankle in the trenches, soldiers were unable to maintain hygiene standards and best practices that recommend keeping feet clean and, most importantly, dry at all times when not bathing. Soldiers suffered bravely in the waterlogged trenches, as tight boots, wet conditions, and cold caused foot swelling and pain.





Prolonged exposure to damp conditions and extreme cold could lead to gangrene and even amputation in severe cases. Trench foot led to a high number of evacuations from the front lines.

To ward off the condition, armies tried various techniques including inspections, ordering troops to change into dry socks as often as possible and rub whale oil into their feet to create a protective barrier, and even conducting stomping drills with soldiers moving and rubbing their feet in unison to increase blood flow. Soldiers also tried digging drainage ditches and laying wooden boards through trenches to avoid flooding.



In addition to trench foot, soldiers frequently contracted lice, parasites, and viral/bacterial infections such as the flu due to infrequent changes of clothing, unhygienic battlefield conditions, and close proximity to other soldiers in cramped living quarters.